

4-12-2020: Easter Sunrise Service Meditation
“The Empty Tomb is Full of Peace”
Rev. Dr. Mary Miller – Mt. Carmel UMC

John 20:1-10 -- The Empty Tomb

20 “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.” (NIV)

This year Easter is very different for our church. Easter services have been cancelled here and all over the world due to the COVID19 Corona Virus. This is pandemic is epic. The church buildings lay empty. But has Easter really been cancelled?

Let us remember that at the first Easter for Christians there were no church buildings, and the tomb where they buried Jesus was empty.

The Gospel of John reports that early in the morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. She had come with other women to anoint the body of Jesus in order to give him a proper burial. There hadn’t been time for that to happen on Friday evening when he was taken down from the cross because the Sabbath had begun. It would have to wait until dawn on Sunday morning.

Mary Magdalene comes first to the empty tomb. She sees the stone rolled away and it frightens her. So she runs to get Peter and John. They run together as fast as they can to the tomb. John outran Peter, and when he got there, he looked inside, and saw those grave clothes lying there in disarray.

Just imagine for a moment what emotions might have been going on – shock, anger, fear, sorrow, disbelief? Maybe you have gone through some of these emotions these past Sundays when we have been unable to worship together at church. I can say it has been difficult for me to pastor an empty church! Everyone is quarantined and closed off in fear. We have been locked up in our own upper rooms.

John saw the strips of linen lying in the tomb but is afraid to go in. Simon Peter, however, goes straight in the tomb. He takes a deeper look and discovers not only are the strips of linens lying there, but the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was carefully folded in a separate place.

I think this story tells us a lot about who Jesus is and His plan for us. Although the tomb is empty, Jesus doesn't leave us empty handed. It is here in the midst of our fear and disillusionment that Jesus meets us with hope.

Some of us may be like John and are afraid to go in. Others of us may be like Peter and jump right in to the empty tomb. The scriptures tell us that "(John) saw and believed!"

We know from other Gospel accounts that Peter and Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb also saw and believed in faith that this was not the end of the story. After they went in the empty tomb and looked around a bit, they had a sense of peace.

The Bible tells us there were two items found in that empty tomb: the linens for His body and the linen for His head.

Let me just say there is nothing that happens on earth that God doesn't already know in heaven. God is so purposeful and has an appointed time for everything. According to Jewish tradition, as long as the napkin was folded on the table, the Master of the house was not done. Jesus left a message that morning with the head linen neatly laid aside. He said "I am not done yet!"

Look around! This was the first miracle that "He is not here. He is risen from the dead!" Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

The scriptures say they still did not understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead. I believe they were given the gift of faith and peace with those linens. The concept of peace comes from the Hebrew word "shalom." Shalom means "completeness, wholeness, health, peace, safety, fullness, rest, and harmony with God." (Hebrew Bible Dictionary).

I visited the Israel in 2000 and visited the Garden Tomb. I don't have enough words to describe the amount of peace that I felt walking in that empty tomb. You don't have to go to the empty Garden Tomb in Jerusalem to experience Jesus' peace. Neither do you have to worship with all the fanfare of Easter in our sanctuary at Mt. Carmel to encounter this peace.

Our God is so very patient with us. What is amazing about God's peace is you don't have to understand it fully to receive it. Jesus meets us right where we are in our faith whether we find ourselves full or empty.

He works with our faith restoring our emptiness from the inside out. John, Peter, and Mary Magdalene come to find the empty tomb to be full of promise.

You can have peace with God today. Jesus says, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)**

When Jesus met his disciples after the resurrection and before His ascension, he simply says to them, **“Peace.” (John 20:19,21,26)**. Peace is a precious gift we have from personally knowing Jesus.

The tomb is empty. Our church is empty. Our lives may feel vacant. But do you know you can have the fullness of Christ’s peace today? Pray the prayer below and know Christ’s peace today. You can’t have a better Easter than this!

Dear God,

I am alone and afraid. I struggle to believe that you are who you say you are. I, like Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John, find myself in an empty grave. Lord Jesus help me in my unbelief! I know I am a sinner. I ask for your forgiveness. I am confessing in faith with my mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and rose from the grave. I want to trust Him with my whole heart that as He rose from the grave, I too will one day rise with Him and go to heaven. I want to follow Jesus as my Lord and Savior from this day forward. Guide my life and help me do your will. Grant me your perfect peace. I pray this in the name of the risen Christ, Jesus, my Lord and Savior. Amen.

CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY!

1 Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Earth and heaven in chorus say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!

2 Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!

3 Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once he died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where's thy victory, boasting grave? Alleluia!

4 Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

(Charles Wesley, 1739)

**This Easter Celebration – NEW HYMN FOR 2020!
(Tune: "The Church's One Foundation")**

This Easter celebration is not like ones we've known.
We pray in isolation, we sing the hymns alone.
We're distant from our neighbors — from worship leaders, too.
No flowers grace the chancel to set a festive mood.

No gathered choirs are singing; no banners lead the way.
O God of love and promise, where's joy this Easter Day?
With sanctuaries empty, may homes become the place
we ponder resurrection and celebrate your grace.

Our joy won't come from worship that's in a crowded room
but from the news of women who saw the empty tomb.
Our joy comes from disciples who ran with haste to see —
who heard that Christ is risen, and then, by grace, believed.

In all the grief and suffering, may we remember well:
Christ suffered crucifixion and faced the powers of hell.
Each Easter bears the promise: Christ rose that glorious day!
Now nothing in creation can keep your love away.

We thank you that on Easter, your church is blessed to be
a scattered, faithful body that's doing ministry.
In homes and in the places of help and healing, too,
we live the Easter message by gladly serving you.

-Carolyn Gillette, 2020